

Building Pedagogical Intelligence

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Abstract: In order to help students pursue learning in more intentional, integrative ways, Hutchings suggests a strategy of expanding the use of student evaluations of teaching.

Essay:

It's hard to find a campus today that doesn't collect student evaluations of teaching. Not everyone, it's true, puts full stock in the results, but it's hard to argue with the idea that students have important perspectives to contribute. On the other hand, it strikes me that listening to students is a good idea that doesn't go far enough. With student ratings of teaching almost ubiquitous, why not take the process up a notch by giving students some guidance about what to look for?

Some years back, I heard about a promising step in this direction that has stuck with me ever since. In the late 1970s, Carleton College implemented something called the Student Observer Program. Any Carleton faculty member could (and still can) ask for a student observer to sit in on her or his classes, usually for the entire term. Students not only receive training about what to look for in an effective classroom, they also have a powerful opportunity to reflect on the process of teaching and learning. And we know that learners who are self-conscious about that process tend to be more successful.

A different approach has emerged at Western Washington University (WWU). Wanting to involve students in a campus initiative on the scholarship of teaching and learning, WWU developed a course in which students study the learning process and the conditions under which learning—their own, that is—is most likely to occur. Some 200 students have now taken the course (which has evolved over the several quarters it has been offered), becoming, as a consequence, much more active contributors to campus discussion about how to improve the educational experience.

Some may worry that giving students a bigger voice adds fuel to the fire of consumerism. Students may know what they *want*, the argument goes, but faculty members know what they *need*, and have, after all, a responsibility to maintain the integrity of the educational process. But that's just the point. Part of a faculty's responsibility should be to let students in on the tricks and truths of the learning trade. Thanks to several decades of educational innovation and research, much more is now known about how learning occurs and what works in the classroom. It's time to start sharing that knowledge with students. Doing so—as at Carleton and Western Washington—would make students better contributors to the improvement of teaching by raising the quality of the feedback they can offer.

More important, having a voice in matters pedagogical would make students better learners. It's easy for those of us in "the business" to forget that getting educated isn't easy. Just jumping through the hoops is not enough. Students need to be able to make connections between what is learned in very different, and typically unconnected, settings. And to do this they need to be able to step back and see what their efforts add up to, to take stock both of what they have learned and what it will take to get to a next level of understanding. In a word, they need to be agents of their own learning.

As a faculty member for many years, I saw first hand how difficult it is for students to reflect on and assess their own experiences as learners, to get past the idea of learning as something that happens *to* them (or not), to see their education as something they can create and control. But when teachers continue to create opportunities for such self-assessment, students get better at identifying and seeking out what they need to advance their knowledge and abilities. In short, we can help students get smarter about what it *takes* to get smarter.

The notion of multiple intelligences has had wide play for more than a decade. Howard Gardner postulates a whole set of them: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, and personal intelligences. Daniel Goleman has popularized the idea of an emotional intelligence. The word "intelligence" invites some misunderstandings since it seems to suggest traits that are inherited and static. But the idea that multiple capacities and dispositions are both possible and, indeed, necessary to function effectively in the world is a right one, and I would propose that we need yet another as well. Let us call it a "pedagogical intelligence"—an understanding about how learning happens, and a disposition and capacity to shape one's own learning. Whatever the term, it is something that is increasingly needed today as the world becomes more complicated, as boundaries of all kinds shift, and as change becomes a constant expectation.

This is not to suggest that Econ 101 or 19th Century American Lit be turned into occasions to obsess about the learning process. But the disposition to be thoughtful about one's own learning, to be an active agent of learning, to find and even to *design* experiences in which learning is advanced—these are goals that should be central to undergraduate education. And the good news is that once students get a taste for these goals, there's no going back. "I had a class where we studied how we learn," says Erik Skogsberg, a student in the course at Western Washington University. "It flipped a

switch, and once it's flipped it can't be turned off."

There is more than one way to induce a disposition to be reflective about how learning occurs. A great place to start—one just begging to be used more effectively—is with the questions students are asked to address on course evaluation forms. A handful of provocative questions, and the discussions that can be had around them, just might be the beginning of a "pedagogical intelligence" that deepens learning through college and beyond.

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